DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 610 PS 016 380

AUTHOR Oden, Sherri
TITLE The Development of Social Competence in Children.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 87
CONTRACT OERI-400-86-0023
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attachment Behavior; Cognitive Development; Elementary Education; Elementary School Students; *Infants; *Interpersonal Competence; Parent Child Relationship; Peer Relationship; *Social Cognition; *Socialization; *Toddlers; Young Children
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Research on the development of social competence in children is reviewed in this ERIC digest. The focus is on the social development of infants and toddlers which takes place in the family, in peer groups, and in preschool. The importance of infant bonding with at least one particular adult, socialization of the developing child within the family context, and the contribution of peer relationships to social development are discussed. Also considered are factors which limit children's social development, peer relationships in elementary school and the long-term benefits of positive peer interactions, and societal factors which influence children's social development. (RH)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

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ERIC Digest

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The Development of Social Competence in Children

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Sherri Oden

Researchers have tried to pinpoint the origins of positive social adjustment in relation to genetic, familial, educational, and other factors. This paper reviews research on the development of social competence in infants and children, emphasizing the developmental processes which take place in the family, peer groups, preschool, and elementary school. Also discussed are difficulties in social development.

Infants as Social Beings

Breakthroughs in methodology for assessing infants' perceptual abilities have shown that even newborns are quite perceptive, active, and responsive during physical and social interaction. The newborn infant will imitate people, stick out its tongue, flutter its eyelashes, and open and close its mouth in response to similar actions from an adult or older child. Through crying and other distress sounds, the infant signals physical needs for food, warmth, safety, touch, and comfort.

Infants' physical requirements are best met when delivered along with social contact and interaction. Babies who lack human interaction may "fail to thrive." Such infants will fail to gain sufficient weight and will become indifferent, listless, withdrawn and/or depressed, and in some cases will not survive (Clarke-Stewart & Koch, 1983).

Increasingly, an infant will engage in social exchanges by a "reciprocal matching" process in which both the infant and adult attempt to match or copy each other by approximation of each other's gaze, use of tongue, sounds, and smiles. Bruner (1978) and others have proposed that these social interaction processes also constitute a "fine tuning" system for language and cognitive development.

Family Attachment Systems

It is important for infants to maintain close relationships with one or more adults. Typically, one adult is the mother, but others may be fathers, older siblings, or family friends. The smiling and laughing of an infant become responses to social stimulation and objects provided by specific persons (Goldbert, 1982). A growing "bonding" attachment, marked by strong mutual affect, with at least one particular adult, is critical to the child's welfare and social-emotional development.

Attachment, evident within six to nine months, becomes obvious when the infant shows distress when the mother (or other attachment figure) departs from a setting. Infants and toddlers who are "securely attached" are affectionate and tend not to cling to their mothers, but to explore the surrounding physical and social environments from this "secure base," showing interest in others and sharing their explorations with the mother by pointing and bringing objects of interest.

The socialization of the child is facilitated not only by the parents, but also within the family context, which may include relatives and friends who support the parents and children, and further reinforce cultural values. Studies by Baumrind (1973) and others have shown that, as children develop, parents use different methods of control or leadership styles in family management that fall into fairly predictable categories:

- authoritarian (high control)
- authoritative (authority through having knowledge and providing direction)
- permissive (low control or direction)
- combinations of the above

Some cultural groups tend to prefer one or the other of these styles, each of which encourages and controls different patterns of behavior in children. Mothers who are more verbal in their influence on children's actions have been found to use "benign" instructive direction that appears to result in the child having greater social competence at home, with peers, and in school settings.

Peer Relationships

As a toddler, the child moves in peer contexts which provide opportunities for learning to sustain interaction and develop understanding of others. Piaget (1932) pointed to peer interaction as one major source of cognitive as well as social development, particularly for the development of role-taking and empathy. In the contexts of school, neighborhood, and home, children learn to discriminate among different types of peer relationships—best friends, social friends, activity partners, acquaintances, and strangers (Oden, 1987). Through engaging in peer relationships and social experiences, especially peer conflict, children acquire knowledge of the self versus other and a range of social

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interaction skills. Mixed-age peer interaction also contributes to the social-cognitive and language development of the younger child while enhancing the instructive abilities of the older child (Hartup, 1983).

Children's social-cognitive development, including moral judgment, appears to parallel cognitive development as children's perceptions of relationships, peers, and social situations become more abstract and less egocentric.

Preschoolers are less able to differentiate between best friends and friends than elementary school-age children. But young children can provide specific reasons why they do not like to interact with certain peers. From six to 14 years, children shift their views of friendship relationships from sharing of physical activities to sharing of materials, being kind or helpful, and, eventually, perceiving friendships that allow individuality to be expressed or supported (Berndt, 1981).

Limiting Factors in Social Development

A child's connection with a given family, neighborhood, center, or school may limit opportunities for social development. Mixed age, sex, racial, or cultural peer interactions may be infrequent and highly bound by activity differences and early learned expectations, thereby limiting the extent of diversity in peer interaction. This lack of diversity limits the child's ability to be socially competent in various circumstances (Ramsey, 1986).

Formally structured educational situations, built around teacher-group interaction, tend to result in fewer peer interactions than occur in less formal settings. Fewer socially isolated children are found in informal classrooms where activities are built around projects in which peers can establish skills for collaboration and activity partnership (Hallinan, 1981).

The long term benefits of positive peer interactions and relationships have been shown in a number of studies (Oden, 1986). Greater social adjustment in high school and adulthood has been found for people who at 9 or 10 years of age were judged to be modestly to well accepted by peers. Poor peer acceptance results in fewer peer experiences, few of which are positive, thus creating a vicious cycle of peer rejection.

Various instructional approaches and experiences related to social skills development have proved effective in increasing children's social competence. Coaching, modeling, reinforcement, and peer pairing are methods based on the same learning processes evident in early adult-child relations. With these methods, social-cognitive and behavioral skills can be developed which can provide poorly accepted peers with the ability to break the cycle of peer rejection. Children appear to learn how to more competently assess peer norms, values, and expectations and select actions that may bring them within the "threshold of peer acceptance" (Oden, 1987).

Societal factors also affect children's social development. Stressed families and those with little time for interaction with children have become a focus of research as divorce rates have risen. Poverty conditions undermine opportunities for children's positive development. Further investigation is needed on the linkage between child development and social factors.

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This digest was prepared for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 1987.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. OERI 400-86-0023. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.